

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 183

CS 506 108

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TITLE The Communicative Response Repertoire of Children's Television Cartoon Characters.
PUB DATE Oct 87
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture/American Culture Association in the South (October 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cartoons; Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Television; *Commercial Television; Cultural Images; Females; Intermediate Grades; Media Research; Popular Culture; Role Models; Socialization; Stereotypes; Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS Social Learning Theory

ABSTRACT

In order to determine some of the effects of children's television, a study investigated the communicative response repertoire of primary female characters in Saturday morning children's cartoons as perceived by children. Those perceptions were then compared with those of the researchers, formulated through previous studies, showing a relationship between violent television programs and levels of aggression. An additional consideration was that these programs may provide a set of role models from which children learn a repertoire of potential behaviors. Subjects, 61 fourth and fifth graders from a Louisiana elementary school, were tested to ascertain their perceptions of the principal female characters in six of the top ten morning cartoon programs. Results demonstrated differences between researchers' and children's perceptions, with the latter perceiving the characters with somewhat more balance and flexibility. Data seems to indicate that researchers should not assume that the child's perception of the communicative response repertoire of these characters is either uniform or in conformity with adult perceptions. (Twelve references are included.) (MS)

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The Communicative Response Repertoire of Children's
Television Cartoon Characters

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A paper presented at the 1987 Annual Meeting of the Popular
Culture/American Culture Association in the South

October, 1987

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The purpose of this study is twofold: (a) to determine the communicative response repertoire of primary female characters in Saturday morning children's cartoons as they are perceived by children who are part of the target audience, and (b) to compare those perceptions with those of the researchers as they were formulated through previous studies. Our specific research questions are:

1. How do children of target audience age perceive the communicative response repertoire of principal female characters as they may be characterized along violent to communicative and dominant to submissive dimensions?
2. Do the perceptions of these children differ according to gender of the child?
3. How do these perceptions differ from those of the researchers as described in a previous study.?

EFFECTS OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

Generations of parents have questioned the role that media play in the lives of their children. Every parent has heard horror stories about behaviors prompted by television, such as the instance when a child jumped off a four-story building in the belief that he would soar into the sky like a cartoon character. Many cartoons contain

violent incidents and stunts which some children have imitated. (Kaye, 1974)

Although the effects of children's television have been studied for decades, we need more research. The continually changing television programs, cultural influences, economic pressures on the media, and differences between children continually raise new questions. As Davis and Baran (1981) wrote: "We do not fully know the effects of children's early exposure to various codes". (p. 67) According to Bower (1984), "researchers report that exposure to violent television programs is significantly related to current levels of aggression and future changes in aggression among girls...and boys in...the United States". (p. 190)

In addition to the concern that children's programming may produce violent behavior, many have noted that it may provide a set of role models from which children learn a repertoire of potential behaviors. Most often this concern is grounded theoretically within the framework of Bandura's social learning theory, which is seen to provide an appropriate rationale for the vicarious learning of social role and social behavior for children. (Bandura, 1971, 1977)

Social learning theory sees human behavior as a product of several principle processes, including the

process of vicarious learning through the observation of others and the consequences their behaviors have for them. The persons' capacity to learn through such vicarious processes enables them to acquire large integrated units of behavior by example without having to build a pattern of action through trial and error. (Bandura, 1971, pp.2-3)

This effect, as demonstrated by the invention of Tragedy by the 5th Century B.C. Greek playwrights (Sophocles among others), is not necessarily negative in regards to human behaviour. The Greeks believed that humans needed vicarious violence to expunge what would later be called "bad humours" from the psyche; humours which would become manifest in real violent behaviour if not released in the more socially acceptable mode of the Theatron.

Bandura specifically recognizes that other adults, peers and symbolic models play influential roles in the learning processes of children. He notes that children who are exposed to conflicting role standards, as represented by the actions of adults, peers and other observed models of action, will adopt different standards of conduct than if adults alone provide the role models. (Bandura, Grusec, and Menlove, 1967)

Shemer summarizes the social learning theory perspective on television as follows:

To the developing child, televised modeling,

which dramatizes a vast range of moral conflicts, constitutes another integral part of social learning. What is portrayed as acceptable conduct on TV programs might be reprehensible conduct by parental standards. (Shemer, 1979)

In summary, it is assumed that the vicarious role models represented by Saturday morning cartoon characters constitute one very important source of learning for the child, particularly with respect to the appropriate and inappropriate lines of communicative action (in the sense described by Goffman in 1959), which are available for inclusion in the child's overall repertoire.

This is, of course, not the first effort to investigate role modeling in the media. Studies by Goff, Goff and Lehrer (1980), Mayes and Valentine (1979), Seggar, Hafen and Nonnonen-Gladding (1981), Reinstein (1984), and others have investigated various aspects of role modeling and stereotyping, particularly sex role stereotyping and role modeling in child oriented media. There is a need, however, to continually review the content of such programming, particularly as it represents potential changes in acceptable models of communicative behavior with respect to peer group relationships and conflict management.

In a previous study, Dobkins (1987) analyzed female cartoon characters to ascertain their modal behaviors along

the relational dimension of submission/dominance, and the conflict management dimension represented by a continuum from violent to communicative. These findings showed that, in the perception of the researcher, female characters from several (nine) of the most popular Saturday morning cartoons could be characterized dichotomously as either dominant/violent characters or as submissive/communicative characters. There was a noticeable shortage of female characters who were of co-equal status with their male counterparts and who used what might be considered appropriate communicative strategies in conflict management. Most characters, with a few exceptions, showed deference to male counterparts in terms of suggesting or initiating lines of action. This was true in many cases even of those principal female characters who used violent conflict management strategies.

From a social learning perspective, however, the question may well be not so much what we as researchers, adults, etc., perceive as the potential role models offered by these characters, but what do the children perceive in them? Are their perceptions the same as ours? Do they perceive a more violent world, or perhaps a less violent one? Do the effects of other social learning models in their lives perhaps cause them to perceive these characters differently?

METHOD

In an attempt to answer these questions, in the form of the research questions phrased earlier, sixty-one fourth and fifth graders from Mount Carmel Elementary School in Abbeville, Louisiana, were tested to ascertain their perceptions of the principal female characters in six of the top ten (according to ARBITRON ratings) Saturday morning cartoon programs.

The children were shown three to four minute clips of each of the six programs. Between viewings the children were asked to fill out a simple, open-ended questionnaire which asked the following four questions.

1. Who is the most important girl character in the cartoon you just saw?
2. What is she like? (The children were instructed to provide three or four descriptive words.)
3. If she got into trouble what kind of trouble would it be?
4. What would she do to get out of her trouble or solve her problem?
5. If she had an argument with one of the boys in the cartoon, how would she handle it?

Before beginning the study, the researchers read through the questions with the children and explained that there could be no wrong answers and that we "just wanted to

know what they thought". We explained each question and told them that if they couldn't think of anything for one of the characters to just leave that question blank. The children were then shown each cartoon clip in sequence and were given time to complete their questionnaires between viewings. The researchers waited until all subjects were finished with the questionnaire before moving on to the next clip. Total testing time for the six segments was forty-two minutes for the fourth grade and thirty-five minutes for the fifth grade. The children responded to the study with considerable enthusiasm and at its conclusion thanked us for getting them out of math.

Since not all children responded to every question for all six cartoons and since some children didn't respond to some characters at all, the number of responses varied per cartoon clip. In no case, however, did we receive less than fifty-one usable responses for a clip.

Programs used in the study were:

1. The Flintstones Kids
2. Muppet Babies
3. Pee Wee's Playhouse
4. Teen Wolf
5. Galaxy High
6. Dungeons and Dragons

The data was analyzed by characterizing each child's response to each character according to its best fit in a three by two matrix composed of the categories dominant, co-equal and submissive, which were used to represent the relational dimension, and violent or communicative, used to represent the conflict management dimension. Thus a child's response to a female character could be categorized as: 1. dominant/violent; 2. dominant/communicative; 3. co-equal/violent; 4. co-equal/communicative; 5. submissive/violent; 6. submissive/communicative.

The researchers simply read each child's responses, discussed them, argued about them and eventually reached consensus as to the category of best fit. Where no consensus could be reached, the response for that character was not used. The open-ended format was chosen to allow the researchers to determine whether their category system was adequate or whether another was suggested by the data and in an attempt to shape the children's perceptions as little as possible as a more close-ended response might have done. Separate frequency counts were kept in each category for boys and girls.

Percentages were computed by the responses in each category for boys and girls in order to give an overall characterization of how these children perceive the behavior of these characters. Percentages were also

computed for the violent/communicative and dominant/co-equal/submissive categories without regard to their cross classification. A complex chi square was computed using the male/female dichotomy and the six categories of behavior.

RESULTS

The chi square analysis comparing male with female responses failed to even approach significance, ($\chi^2=8.58$, d.f.=5 alpha value for .05=11.1) thus answering our research question concerning possible differences between male and female perceptions of female characters. The boys and girls in this sample at least, do not differ significantly in the way they perceive female cartoon characters.

As to the question of how they do perceive these characters, and how those perceptions differ from earlier analysis by the researchers, the most appropriate answer is probably rather differently and with somewhat more balance and flexibility. While the breakdown of percentages by category still shows that the submissive communicative female is the one most commonly perceived by these children, they also frequently see other kinds of characters as well. To put it another way, the dichotomy between dominant/violent and submissive/communicative is

less clearly defined in the perception of these children, but still seems to be the dominant mode of perception for both boys and girls. The percentages for each category are:

Dominant/violent.....19.24%
 Dominant/communicative.....13.20%
 Co-equal/violent.....4.15%
 Co-equal/communicative.....24.9%
 Submissive/violent.....4.15%
 Submissive/communicative.....34.33%

While submissive/communicative is the most dominant perception of these characters there are also substantial frequencies in the dominant/violent, co-equal/communicative and dominant/communicative categories.

When one looks at the two continua separately, the balanced perception of these children is more striking. Along the relational dimension the percentages were:

Dominant.....33.3%
 Co-equal.....30.07%
 Submissive.....36.59%

There is obvious balance here, although the submissive category is slightly the largest.

The differences between the violent and communicative categories on the conflict management continuum are slightly less balanced.

Violent.....41.78%

Communicative.....58.28%

While this difference is not a significant deviation from random probability it may still indicate a perception by these children that female cartoon characters may more often than not use other than violent strategies to manage conflict.

This does raise the issue that a violent/communicative continuum may not be discreet enough to capture the true nature of these data. Further study should consider a more developed continuum, including such categories as evasive and manipulative.

Further study is planned with a larger, more diverse body of subjects, and with more sophisticated measurement techniques. Still these data seem to indicate that researchers should not assume that the child's perception of the communicative response repertoire of these

characters is either uniform or in conformity with adult perceptions.

The study also suggests the need to further study interaction effects between the several socializing influences in a child's perceptive world, including the possibility that strategies and values learned from one source may be transferred to the child's perception of other sources.

The authors believe that a major influence on children's programming and children's perceptions of cartoon role models may be due in large part to the dominant role of female network executives in the past five to eight years and their control particularly of cartooning. (Hannah-Barbera, (60 Minutes, March 1987)). The authors plan to follow up this thesis with a study in Los Angeles, California.

MEMORANDUM

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